

# Dynasty of Decadence

By [Simon Sebag Montefiore for MailOnline](#)  
20 December 2008

## Introduction

The Romanov dynasty lasted 300 years: the lives of its tsars and emperors and empresses is a bejewelled but bloodsplattered chronicle of assassinations, adulteries, tortures, secret marriages, coups, reckless rises and brutal falls.

It is peopled by heroic, brilliant statesmen, soldiers and reformers - as well as nymphomaniacs, martinets, murderers, blunderers, monsters, megalomaniacs and lunatics.

But throughout, Russia's tsars projected their country's greatness in the majestic flamboyance of their clothes, a never-ending parade of ermine, gold and diamonds.

Why were the tsars so taken with high court fashion?

The easy answer is that they could afford to be, owning millions of tax-paying slaves called serfs. But also because, as leaders of a brash new power, they resented and envied the superiority of older established powers like Britain and France.

So they dressed up in order to parade their glory and legitimacy before their own restless empire and an often disdainful world.

Under the Romanovs between 1613 and 1917, Russia was an empire of oppressed nations dominated by one family and a tiny Russian nobility.

The single Imperial family holding it all together used fashion and pomp to show their might, as well as the army and police to oppress opposition.

It did not matter that the vast wealth on display had been created on the backs of serfs who were sold, starved, beaten and raped.

It did not matter either that, on many occasions, the flamboyance of the court scarcely concealed the brutality beneath its glittering surface.

The important thing was to convey the image of power, empire and stability... as well as defiance towards foreign courts.

Glory and magnificence is certainly one way to display stability and grandeur - but it can also be a sign of ludicrous weakness.

By the time of the last Tsar Nicholas II, who succeeded in 1894, the punctilious, rigid hierarchy of uniforms, titles and ranks was the clearest indication of a sclerotic, isolated and inept regime on its last legs, incapable of reforming or saving itself.

Perhaps that is why the most lavish garments in the exhibition belonged to Nicholas.

The fur-trimmed mantles worn by members of the family for his coronation are wildly extravagant. His mother's was more than 20ft long and took seven chamberlains to carry.

Nicholas and his wife's identical mantles were no less grand, using 2,691 ermine skins in total.

As for his fancy dress cloak made from layers of fur-lined silks woven with gold and decorated with pearls the size of marbles, diamonds, rubies, silver brocade and gold buttons, it was so heavily encrusted with jewels that it was given to the armory for safekeeping after Nicholas wore it for a ball in 1903.

Little more than ten years later, the last Tsar was dead, executed by the Bolsheviks.

## **Ivan the Terrible**

It was Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century who was the first of the Grand Dukes of Muscovy to be titled 'Tsar' - or Caesar - but the beginning of the Romanov dynasty in 1613 came after Russia had been beset by civil war, a period known as the Time of Troubles.

Russian national dress in those dark days consisted of kaftans and long, furlined robes with relics and portraits of saints hanging off them.

To Western eyes, it was backward and bizarrely exotic even 100 years later.

In her book, *Dress In 18th Century Europe*, Aileen Ribeiro talks of heavily rouged Russian women who dyed their teeth black and polished them until they gleamed like lacquer.

## **Peter the Great**

The first hint of change came in 1682 - with the secession of Peter the Great, one of the greatest political leaders of all history, a man who was as much a monster as he was a hero.

The achievements of this astonishing titan were colossal: he modernised Russia with German and Dutch engineering and fashion, created a Baltic Fleet, founded St Petersburg and defeated the invading Swedish king.

Yet Peter's modernising did not make him a liberal: he was also a brutal tyrant.

When the Muscovite Streltsy Regiment of musketeers mutinied, Peter returned from his European tour and personally took part in the torture, dismemberment and beheading of hundreds of these musketeers in a scene that resembled a grisly charnel house.

When he thought a former mistress of his, Anna Mons, was being unfaithful, she was arrested and died in terrible conditions.

Worse, when her brother was suspected of flirting with Peter's wife, he was beheaded.

His head was then sent to the Empress before being preserved in a bottle of alcohol: it remains today in Peter's fascinating but gruesome Museum of Oddities in St Petersburg.

Peter the Great was so all-powerful that he emphasised his absoluteness by pretending to be an ordinary sailor in his new navy.

A giant well over 6ft tall, he reserved the right to dress in the uniform of a lowly soldier or sailor, but this in itself was a display of power almost as grand as his glorious coronation robes.

(Incidentally, Stalin, who worshipped Peter the Great, also prided himself on dressing in a plain tunic while commanding the greatest empire on earth.)

In 1721, Peter had himself crowned Emperor and henceforth the Romanovs used that as their main title. This half-genius, half-brute died in 1725 as Russia's greatest ever ruler, but his reckless cruelty had also left his empire in the unstable hands of a succession of women and children.

When his eldest son fled Russia, Peter hunted him down, tricked him home and then tortured him to death, leaving his new empire without an adult heir.

The Romanovs boasted Empresses whose magnificence, extravagance and love lives were legendary.

The love of Peter's life was a courtesan whom he stole from his favourite henchman.

Peter crowned her Empress and she succeeded him as Catherine I, even though she was a peasant-moll without a trace of royalty who had been bought and sold by men for their own pleasures.

Her short reign was just the start of the so-called Age of Petticoats - when a series of women became absolute autocrats of all the Russias.

The last two who ruled as empresses in their own rights were among the greatest - and most scandalous - of all the Romanovs.

## **Elizabeth**

Peter and Catherine's daughter, Elizaveta - who was famously blonde, buxom and longlegged - ruled for 20 stable years when Russia emerged as a European power.

Yet she was wildly extravagant and vain: she believed that her legs were better displayed in male clothing so she famously held transvestite balls in which everyone had to dress as the opposite sex so the Empress would look good.

Her female courtiers hated this, of course, and so did the men.

She was also utterly ruthless - when one of her courtiers' ladies was involved in a conspiracy against her, Elizaveta had her tongue ripped out and she was deported to Siberia.

Empress Elizaveta was also the most promiscuous female ruler of modern times.

She had countless lovers: they varied from Russian princes and Swiss doctors to guardsmen, choirboys and peasant lads who took her fancy.

## **Catherine the Great**

On her death, she was succeeded by a pimply youth named Peter III, whose wife was a minor German princess known to history as Catherine the Great.

She had no claim whatsoever to the throne, but Empress Elizaveta married her to Peter.

In the brutal Russian court, stranded in a miserable cruel and loveless marriage, the clever, blue-eyed Catherine did not manage to become pregnant for years.

The Empress Elizaveta, who had arranged the match, became worried.

So Catherine was encouraged by her to start an adulterous affair with a courtier. She got pregnant and gave birth to a son, Paul.

Since the entire Romanov dynasty down to Nicholas II was descended from him, it is entirely possible that the Romanovs were not Romanovs at all.

With the help of her Guards officers, Catherine overthrew her feeble husband and seized power in 1762.

When she rode into St Petersburg to launch her coup, she was met en route by her French hairdresser, Michel, who did her hair on the way to the revolution.

As she emerged out of the Winter Palace, she dressed up in a male Guards officer's uniform, again showing she was just an ordinary Russian soldier-patriot in one sense.

One Guards officer noticed she was missing a swordknot on her sword so he galloped up and gave her his own: this young man was Gregory Potemkin, who became the love of her life, secret husband and partner in government.

Their love letters remain the most romantic and sexually explicit correspondence of any head of state in history.

Catherine and the brilliant Prince Potemkin were the most humane and decent rulers of Russia - yet they had one big fault: extravagance.

On the big occasions, there was no one more splendid than these two: once when he was trying to seduce a girl, Potemkin served diamonds instead of pudding at a dinner party.

There was a dark side to Catherine, too. When she overthrew her unfortunate husband, he was duly murdered, but secretly.

Catherine, with Potemkin, expanded the Russian empire, annexed the Crimea and much of Poland, created a Black Sea navy and brought Peter the Great's project of making Russia a true Great Power to fruition.

She reigned for 30 years and on her death in 1796, she was succeeded by her embittered, insane and tyrannical son, Emperor Paul I.

## **Paul I**

Paul was one of the worst of the Romanovs. He was so obsessed with his father's murder that he dug up the body to have him reburied with full honours, making his mother - the murderer - walk behind the coffin as chief mourner.

He regularly ordered people to be beaten, tortured or imprisoned and reintroduced the medieval rule that all subjects should abase themselves as his carriage passed by.

Before long he was loathed and, in the end, his courtiers who crept into the palace, chased him up a chimney in his nightshirt, then smashed him in the head with a solid gold inkstand and took turns strangling him.

## **Alexander I**

His son and heir, Alexander I, personified the glamour and triumph of the Romanov dynasty: he was first defeated then charmed by Napoleon. But when the French Emperor invaded Russia in 1812, Alexander rallied and fought Napoleon all the way to Paris.

Alexander bestrode Europe: when President Roosevelt's envoy congratulated Stalin in 1945 on taking Berlin, Stalin retorted: 'Yes, but Alexander made it to Paris!'

## **Nicholas I**

But afterwards came Alexander's cold and very Germanic brother Nicholas I. By now the Romanov family was as much German as Russian and court life was as frosty, stratified, organized and monitored as any Germanic court with its graded uniforms and formal dances.

He created the first modern secret police, run out of his own office and he monitored every part of Russian life.

The Emperor boasted he was a soldier who slept on an iron cot (and Stalin cited this as his own inspiration for his sleeping arrangements.)

All the fizzy exuberance, hedonistic flamboyance and creative energy of the 18th century was now crushed in a Prussian-style police state known as the Prison of Peoples. Meanwhile, the Tsar's arrogant demands towards the Ottoman Empire led to the Crimean War.

## **Alexander II**

There was one last great Romanov Emperor. Nicholas's son, Alexander II, was everything his father wasn't: he ended the Crimean War and then bravely in 1861 liberated the millions of Russian serfs who

were no more than slaves, the property of their noble masters who could beat, rape and sell them and often did.

He was for a while adored by the peasants as the 'Tsar-Liberator' but his early years of almost ending autocracy unleashed such expectations that in the end everyone was disappointed.

Alexander was pursued by terrorists who launched repeated attempts to kill him, until he was a fugitive in his own empire - he responded by expanding the secret police and repression.

Eventually, on a carriage ride through St Petersburg, terrorists tossed bombs under his carriage in 1881, killing the last great Emperor.

## **Alexander III**

His oafish son, Alexander III, was interested in neither reform, culture or women and died young, leaving the throne in 1894 to Nicholas, who married Princess Alexandra of Hesse, Queen Victoria's granddaughter.

## **Nicholas II**

It has been fashionable to paint Nicholas and Alexandra as a saintly and loving couple of martyrs who lived a blameless, bourgeois life.

They certainly loved each other and suffered greatly because their son and heir, the Tsarevich Alexei, was so often in agony and danger due to his hemophilia, indeed threatening the future of the dynasty.

The murder of the couple and their children by Lenin's Bolsheviks in 1918 was certainly a dreadful crime.

Nonetheless, as rulers, they were foolish, stubborn, anti-Semitic and self-indulgent: when thousands of peasants died, trampled underfoot as crowds panicked before their coronation, they insisted on continuing with the ball. After the 1905 revolution, Nicholas organized anti-Jewish pogroms in which thousands of women and children perished.

By the time he entered World War I, Nicholas was despised. The war was a debacle made worse by the tsar trying to command his own armies, while leaving the neurotic, idiotic Alexandra to run the country through Rasputin, a debauched peasant mystic.

## **Conclusion**

When the dynasty ended in March 1917, the Romanovs were not overthrown by terrorists or revolutionaries but by hungry people.

Three hundred years of extravagance and autocratic rule ended more with a whimper than a roar.

The murder on Lenin's orders of the entire Imperial family was the moment it became clear that the days of magnificence would never return.